

“We need an Anne Frank’s Diary for the Residential Schools”

I consider myself an ally for all minority groups. I believe that an integral part of becoming an ally is developing a strong empathetic understanding of historic events that affect any specific group. To learn the realities and the contexts of these events, and to understand-and respect-how those events may manifest directly, and indirectly, over time.

Oppression, racism, and prejudice are not phenomena that I am familiar with in any personal capacity. I cannot sympathize with them because they have never happened to me. Instead, I rely on empathetic connections. I have been reliant on books my entire life to learn the stories of other people. I’ve also relied on the school curricula to introduce me to these books, since left to my own devices; I would not have been likely to read anything except Goosebumps and the Star Wars spinoffs.

I consider this to be an unequivocally good thing. Thanks to the various novel studies I had been a part of in my grade school, I had been introduced to a plethora of enlightening stories detailing true and terrible events. Books like Anne Frank’s Diary, To Kill a Mockingbird, the Kite Runner and many more exposed me to stories about horrific events that should never be repeated or forgotten. Even the assimilation and cultural genocide campaigns

my Irish and Scottish ancestors had suffered through, I learned of through novels. I will never have a perfect idea of how it may feel to be a Jew in Nazi Germany, or an Afghan Refugee fleeing from his home in a filthy oil tanker, but the stories gave me an iota of understanding that allows me, if not to help, at least not hurt people who were affected by similar traumas.

What concerns me is that, despite my grade school literary repertoire being so broad as to include stories of Afghan refugees, starved Celtic farmers, and Chinese soldiers at war, I can't remember ever doing a novel study about Indigenous Canadians. The only book I recall reading for a class that even had a native character was "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest".

I opt not to blame modern educators for the failing of the constructors of my grade school curricula five to fifteen years ago. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, I found the current (circa 2015) list of fiction and non-fiction novels authorized by the Alberta Government for use in classes from grades four to twelve. It is a public document. If you wish to see it yourselves, you can google "Alberta schools approved novels" and the link to the pdf file will be the first hit.

I scanned the list and singled out books pertaining to various topics. I relied of the in-document appraisals, as well as whatever synopses I found on

Wikipedia and Goodreads. Only by expecting absolutely nothing was I slightly surprised. The list consists of slightly fewer than three hundred novels. Of these three hundred-odd novels, fourteen featured a native or Inuit protagonist. Of the fourteen novels, eight were written by First Nations, Metis, or Inuit authors. Additionally, eleven novels featured prominent FNMI characters. This list also provided helpful appraisals for each novel informing/warning educators whether these characters are positively or negatively portrayed. Allow me to share some of my favourites:

*For A Thief of Time*: “The protagonists... are strong, well developed characters who do not fall into the category of stock or stereotype “Natives.” They exhibit the full range of human emotions...”

*For Blood Red Ochre*: “Historical white men are portrayed negatively in what may be a challenging read for some students.”

This next one especially gave me a good laugh.

*This one is for Touch The Earth (a non-fiction compilation of photos and speeches*: “[This book’s] bias should be recognized and the book [should be] used only if accompanied by other material and activities, either to balance the “white view” often historically

presented, or with literature that reveals some examples of

Caucasians who have interacted positively with Native people.”

Allow me to very quickly admit that these quotes are specifically selected for the sake of levity. I have no idea what discussions took place in consideration for these blurbs that I’ll wager were never expected to be looked at, except maybe by English teachers planning a year’s schedule. I have no intention or desire to attack any individual for them. What I have no qualms with is criticizing the hell out of is the hypocrisy of the list.

I will make clear that the list is not entirely comprehensive. Several teachers I had consulted with mentioned that many of their peers use novels that aren’t on this list, but pass an approval process. I saw this list less as a set in stone declaration of what kids can and can’t learn, but as a declaration of what the Government of Alberta is officially interested and comfortable with showing and teaching their students. It’s from this interpretation that I found the list the most disturbing.

The summaries of the native-protagonist novels all appraise their educational value regarding the portrayal native peoples and their cultures and histories, but in spite of this there is one baffling absence.

This isn't a single novel on the Alberta Government's list about the Residential Schools. There are ten authorized novels on the list about the Holocaust. There are six authorised novels on the list about slavery in the United States. There are three authorised novels on the list about personal accounts of the nuclear bombings in Japan. And there is not a single authorised book about the residential schools.

I was surprised when "residential" gave me no results with the "find in page" tool. I looked at all the blurbs for the novels with native protagonists, and then looked at their Wikipedia and Goodreads pages, in case the synopses there happened to include a missed plot detail.

The single book in the entire list that details any direct experience with a residential school (an American residential school, mind you) is "The Education of Little Tree". In a book that details the entire childhood and adolescence of an orphan raised by his Cherokee grandparents, this is the extent of his experience, as summarized on Wikipedia:

"The state eventually forces Little Tree into a residential school, where he stays for a few months. At the school, Little Tree suffers from the prejudice and ignorance of the school's caretakers toward Indians and the natural world. Little Tree is rescued when his

grandparents' Native American friend Willow John notices his unhappiness and demands Little Tree be withdrawn from the school.”

I'm assuming that the summary is accurate. I refuse to read the book for myself. The author published the book under the pen name “Forrest Carter”, who in early editions claimed that the book was autobiographical. It turned out that the true identity of Forrest Carter was “Asa Earl Carter”, a Ku Klux Klan Leader best known for leading an attack on Nat King Cole mid-performance in 1956, as well as writing several speeches for segregationist politicians in the Sixties. He admitted upon exposure that Little Tree was pure fabrication, but insisted that he was of Cherokee descent on his mother's maternal grandparents' side. The only acknowledgement of any of this in the Government's blurb? “While the novel uses an autobiographical voice, it is a fictionalized account using a child's perception to enhance the humorous style.”

We need an Anne Frank's Diary for the residential schools: A narrative account that can better communicate the pain that those institutions imbued into their victims than a lecture in a grade eight social studies class. There are high school-level novels on the list that have escaping and healing the

traumas of sexual abuse and child abuse as their central themes; content should not be an issue. I would not be surprised for the Catholic school boards throughout the province to be less than enthusiastic about airing their parent company's dirty laundry to their students for marks (unless maybe we can find them a novel about one of the protestant residential school they could criticize), but considering that Alberta housed thirty three Residential schools, and doesn't have a single book about them that they're officially prepared to teach children with feels to me like they are trying to help students forget history that shouldn't be forgotten.

If the issue is a lack of knowledge of an appropriate candidate, I'm positive plenty of my peers can come up with fantastic suggestions. One off the top of my own head that I would recommend is Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse*. He already has an approved novel on the list: the *one* novel about the sixties scoop. And *Indian Horse* as well would be a fine book for a high school novel study. The abuse isn't viscerally detailed, the hockey scenes are well written and should intrigue younger readers, I have heard praise from more spiritually familiar individuals regarding the protagonist's path of healing, and there was a decent film adaptation released this year that teachers could incorporate into the study.

To finish, I had not been exposed to aboriginal literature until my second year of post-secondary. I had not been exposed to literature or media that offered any insight into the extent of the pain the residential schools caused until I took a senior-level course in my fourth year, and it doesn't look like it's any easier for younger people right now to find it. For a part of Alberta's history that's so recent, and that's affected so many, that feels far too exclusive.